

God's Power and Human Flourishing:

A Biblical Inquiry after Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*

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While writing this paper, from the next room have come the sounds of African voices. They are recordings recently made in Rwanda by my daughter in the course of her researching a dissertation in social anthropology on the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, in which about a million people died. I have been reading the transcripts she has been making of interviews with survivors of the genocide and with those who, often as survivors themselves, have been helping in its aftermath as leaders of programs, trauma counsellors, nurses, and more. My tears have frequently welled up as the testimonies flow on: babies, children, wives, husbands, parents, neighbors, teachers, pupils, priests, congregations—hunted, betrayed, macheteed, burned, tortured, mutilated. Every one of the women who spoke was raped, and many were infected with HIV. The interviews themselves are punctuated with tears, and one after another speaks of prolonged weeping and grief.

Yet that is not all. There is also a great deal of gratitude, especially to God. Most of the informants are Christians (Rwanda being statistically one of the most Christian

countries in the world), and they often give thanks for their survival¹ and for the ways in which they have been able to rebuild their lives, above all by finding new dignity and family-like relationships in groups and churches. There are frequent references to the Bible in its mode as a text that is inhabited and has ample provision for lament in the face of overwhelming suffering and grief. The pictures of Rwandan life now are very mixed, and the devastating effects of the genocide continue, but there are also vivid glimpses of love, hope, and even joy. So in the aftermath of their trauma, many Rwandans affirm both the power of God and some experience of flourishing, and they often do so in scriptural idiom.

The Rwandan genocide has impinged unexpectedly and sharply on this paper by acting as an immediate touchstone for thought about God's power and human flourishing. It has also posed questions to my leading contemporary dialogue partner, Charles Taylor, and his book *A Secular Age*.²

His core theme is the story of how, between 1500 AD and today, Western culture has moved from taking religion for granted as the overall framework of reality to having no such framework at all. Now, even people with strong faith are aware that theirs is one possibility among others, many of which are atheist or agnostic. So the context within which faith is held has changed drastically, to the extent that in some situations (academic life being the one he mentions most frequently) what Taylor calls "exclusive humanism" is virtually taken for granted as the common sense of educated people. The

¹ Their giving thanks for survival does not imply that God was not caring for those who were killed. When this issue is addressed, it is often done so indirectly, taking for granted that of course the dead are in the good hands of God, but that God had other plans for those who survived. A theological interpretation of the language might be that there is a realistic acceptance that other powers exist besides God, that some are evil, and that, while the latter do not have ultimate power, they can do horrendous things.

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

age is secular (in the West and places influenced by it) neither because most spheres of public life function without reference to religion, nor because of a falling off of religious belief and practice (though both are often the case), but primarily because of a titanic change in “the whole context of understanding, in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place.”³ Taylor describes the genesis and development of key aspects of this transformation, especially the discovery or invention of an immanent, impersonal order in nature that could be explained in its own terms without reference to a Creator, and that made exclusive humanism imaginable and realizable. Yet he also contests one of the most common accounts of this transformation, according to which science and other aspects of modernity have led to secularization and the decline of religion. He notes by contrast the ways in which the development of modernity itself, including key aspects of secularization, have often had religious motivations and forms, and also how exclusive humanism is itself a creative invention of a new form of life rather than the sensible core that remains after a superfluous overlay of religion has been subtracted.

It is an extraordinarily rich (though somewhat ill-disciplined) book, with many strands that cannot be summarized here. But one central theme is that of human flourishing, because it is the common reference point of the extremes between which Taylor sees our culture stretched—transcendent religion and exclusive humanism. “Every person, and every society, lives with or by some conception(s) of what human flourishing is: what constitutes a fulfilled life? What makes life really worth living? What would we

³ Taylor, p. 3.

most admire people for?”⁴ Taylor describes the critical difference between religion and exclusive humanism in terms of different answers to the question,

Does the highest, the best life involve our seeking, or acknowledging, or serving a good which is beyond, in the sense of independent of human flourishing? In which case, the highest, most real, authentic or adequate human flourishing could include our aiming (also) in our range of final goals at something other than human flourishing It’s clear that in the Judaeo-Christian religious tradition the answer to this question is affirmative. Loving, worshiping God is the ultimate end. Of course, in this tradition God is seen as willing human flourishing, but devotion to God is not seen as contingent on this. The injunction “Thy will be done” isn’t equivalent to “Let humans flourish”, even though we know that God wills human flourishing.⁵

There is even a call to renunciation, to detach oneself from one’s own flourishing.

The call to renounce doesn’t negate the value of flourishing; it is rather a call to centre everything on God, even if it be at the cost of forgoing this unsubstitutable good; and the fruit of this forgoing is that it becomes on one level the source of flourishing for others, and on another level, a collaboration with the restoration of a fuller flourishing by God.⁶

In a further refinement of how Christianity relates to human flourishing, Taylor describes it as combining three dimensions of transcendence: the good higher than human flourishing is the love (*agape*) of God for us “which we can partake of through his power”⁷ and which is a possibility of transformation beyond merely human perfection; this involves the reality of a transcendent, personal God; and the transformation by *agape* also opens out to a future transcending death. All three dimensions are denied by exclusive humanism, which for the first time in history has become a widely available option.

⁴ Taylor, p. 16.

⁵ Taylor, pp. 16f..

⁶ Taylor, p. 17.

⁷ Taylor, p. 20.

Taylor's account of Christianity on human flourishing is developed further at various points in the book and set in the context of a variety of other ways of conceiving human flourishing. His is a generous hermeneutic, allowing the ramifying options in recent centuries to become, one after another, imaginable as commitments that make a certain sense. The cumulative effect is that it becomes understandable how a fully modern (or postmodern) person might choose to follow one of this variety of ways. And the practical effect of this in the intellectual milieu of the contemporary academy is that Taylor, by making the Christian way intellectually and in other respects plausible and respectable, and especially by aligning himself with it, reveals himself as being quite radically counter-cultural. He "comes out" as a philosopher who is a Christian, and he therefore implicitly challenges exclusive humanism as the taken-for-granted "default option" of the academy and other milieus. Yet he is also generous to what he rejects, as especially seen in his acknowledgement of the importance of many exclusive humanists' commitments to human flourishing of types that have not only a deep integrity but also significant overlaps with those of Christians, Jews, Muslims, and others. He has a strong commitment to a democratic public sphere in which there can be deliberations and negotiations for the sake of a common good, about which there can often be sufficient agreement to allow for collaboration in its realization.

I will take Taylor's portrayal of our secular age, centered on human flourishing, as true enough for the purposes of this paper, though more by way of diagnosis than prescription. Were I reviewing Taylor, there would be many questions to raise and pursue, but for now it is an adequate platform from which to launch a discussion of the theme of this consultation. I will also make several other assumptions, which I will state

in the next section. Assuming them does not imply that I think them uncontroversial any more than it is unproblematic to draw on Taylor. I am prepared to argue about these assumptions, but to do so in this paper would take too much space. The challenge of Rwanda will be taken up again at the end of this paper.

Some Assumptions

- God's power in Christian terms assumes the agency of a personal God, and, especially within the period discussed by Taylor, this agency is often denied. It is a major issue involving basic conceptions of God, analogy, agency, nature, history, epistemology, and much else, and it has occupied many Christian thinkers. I am assuming that the problems surrounding God's personal agency are answerable, in the sense not of knockdown arguments but of there being a range of positions that intellectually concerned contemporary Christians might affirm in good conscience.
- One of the main problems that has been raised regarding God's power and human flourishing is that there is some sort of contradiction or competition between the two: that divine freedom cannot coexist with genuine human freedom, that God's power overwhelms human integrity, that a sphere must be reserved for independent human action. I take the opposite view, that human flourishing (as understood by Christians) increases in accordance with the quality of relationship with God and that, as Karl Rahner put it, human freedom varies in direct, not inverse, proportion to involvement with God. This position has been standard for Christian theologians both over the centuries and more recently in the modern situation described by Taylor.

Those I have learnt most from on the above topics include Rahner, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Donald MacKinnon, Austin Farrer, and Katherine Tanner. Although their

positions are diverse, together they give confidence that objections in connection with divine agency and human freedom are not fatal but answerable.

- Power (omnipotence) as an attribute of God has also been the subject of much philosophical and theological discussion, related to the two previous issues but going further in raising the question of the character of God and the interrelation of omnipotence and the other divine attributes. I take for granted the classic position that each of the attributes can be thought through in terms of the others without contradiction: so, for example, God's omnipotence has to be in line with God's love, compassion, and wisdom. I see the Christian theological task in speaking of the power of God as being primarily one of the wise interpretation of Scripture, above all in its testimony to God as Creator and Covenant-giver, to divine providence, to Jesus Christ, and to the Holy Spirit.
- The distinctive Christian conception of God's power in relation to human flourishing is seen in a community whose members trust in God as Creator and in Jesus Christ as Son of God and Lord, who live and worship in the power of the Holy Spirit and who embody fruits of the Holy Spirit such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness/humility, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).

Having made these assumptions, the rest of this paper asks what it means to live in the Holy Spirit in the world described by Taylor.

An Initial Biblical Approach

My main constructive point in this paper is that, whatever else it might mean, a Christian conception of God's power and human flourishing that come together in "living in the Spirit" involves seeking wisdom and shaping life through reading and rereading

Scripture. So it is appropriate to begin by discussing two biblical passages in which the power of God comes together with human flourishing.

God's Power and Scripture-inspired Speech

Luke 24:30–32

³⁰ When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

³¹ Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

³² They said to each other, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

That is the culmination of the walk to Emmaus of two bereaved disciples who are joined by the crucified and risen Jesus. They describe Jesus as, among other things, “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people” (αἰνῶντες τὸν θεόν καὶ πάντων τῶν λαῶν; Luke 24:19). His response to their grief and bewilderment is to interpret the Scriptures to them and then, through breaking, blessing, and sharing bread, to make himself known to them. In the terminology of our consultation, one who embodies the power of God has met the misery of these disciples with heart-transforming biblical teaching and the knowledge that he is alive beyond death. Their “flourishing” is bound up with his presence and blessing, mediated through Scripture and a shared meal. This has for most Christians over the centuries been central to their identity in the form of “word and sacrament.”

The next episode in Luke 24 plays further variations on this theme. After Jesus has appeared to the larger group of disciples, he shows them his wounded hands and feet, eats fish and honeycomb with them, and then gives a final message, interweaving the

interpretation of scriptures, his own death and resurrection, the flourishing of “all nations” through the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins, and the promise of “power (duvnamín) from on high” (Luke 24:44–49). This is a pivotal moment in Jesus’ handing over responsibility to his disciples. Luke completes his account of it in Acts 2 with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, using diverse power imagery: “a rushing mighty wind” (Acts 2:2), “tongues of fire” (Acts 2:3), being “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4), “speaking in other languages” (Acts 2:4), being “filled with new wine” (Acts 2:13). After this, Peter addresses the crowd by beginning with Joel’s prophecy (Acts 2:17–21), which tells of God’s Spirit being poured out on “all flesh” (Acts 2:17). His Spirit-inspired message of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, forgiveness of sins, and the promise of the Holy Spirit to all is shot through with Scripture (Acts 2:17–36). It is a pattern that recurs throughout Acts, perhaps most notably in the story of Stephen. He is described as “a man full of faith and power” (Acts 6:8), whose death by stoning has many echoes of Jesus’ crucifixion, and whose speech at his trial is the longest exposition of Scripture in the New Testament (Acts 7:2–53).⁸

The picture that emerges of human flourishing “in the Spirit” is in line with Taylor’s threefold transcendence. Stephen is a good example of dedication to a good that is higher than self-contained human flourishing, that is inseparable from the reality of God and opens out a future beyond death. At this point it might be noted in passing, however, that the role of Scripture—which is so prominent here—does not figure much in Taylor’s account; and one might note too his preference for other ways of describing Christian

⁸ See David F. Ford, *Christian Wisdom: Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 41–43.

conceptions of “fullness” (one of his key terms for flourishing) than being “filled with the Holy Spirit.”

God’s Power and Christian Midrash

The second passage is the Prologue of the Gospel of John, which too speaks of God’s power and human flourishing, most succinctly in John 1:12: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” In Taylor’s terms, being a child of God is not only about flourishing in an “exclusive humanist” sense; it is God-centered and includes the joys, responsibilities, and disciplines of membership in God’s family. What might be involved in that “power” in Johannine terms? Obviously, a great deal—just from the Prologue it would include life, light, receiving Jesus Christ as the Word of God in faith, glory, grace, and truth. But what about my chosen theme of Scripture? All the terms just mentioned are dense with scriptural reference; but even more fundamental is the whole phenomenon of the Prologue. If one sees the author (whom I will call John) as taking seriously his own message, one must assume that he understood himself to be a recipient of the Holy Spirit as promised by Jesus in his farewell discourses and as breathed by the risen Jesus on his disciples. Among the promises of Jesus is that his followers will be guided into all the truth by the Spirit (John 16:13). If the Prologue is an example of what this might mean, it is vital to note that it is pervaded by Scripture. It begins with a midrash on Genesis 1:1, and what follows thereafter is saturated with references to Genesis, Exodus, Deuteronomy, the wisdom literature, and other scriptural texts. The interpretation of Scripture in the Spirit is woven deeply into the way in which Christian understanding and living are shaped in new situations. The Prologue is perhaps the most influential short, Christian, theological

text; to see it as the outcome of scriptural interpretation in the Spirit is to have a model for future innovation that might even on occasion be as daring as John's; and this is of central importance in continuing to enjoy the power of being a child of God.

Scripture and Flourishing Today: A Jewish Example

If, in line with what has been said so far, one were fantasizing about an ideal prescriptive supplement to Taylor's description of our age, it would be that someone steeped in Scripture and alert to the main features of the twenty-first century world should open up a way of understanding and living in wise faith. That fantasy has been virtually fulfilled for me in the forthcoming book by Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement. A Jewish Theology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2008 [page numbers cited below may not be the same in the published version]). Until reading it I had only known Fishbane as a superb scholar of Jewish Scriptures and their interpretation. Now he has distilled a lifetime of scholarship, deep thoughtfulness, and Jewish living into this work of theology.

Fishbane's book of just over two hundred pages is as spare and focused as Taylor's is discursive and wide-ranging.⁹ There are spheres of contemporary reality upon which Fishbane scarcely touches (such as science, economics, and politics), yet this does not mean that his theology could not relate to them. His basic diagnosis of our cultural situation is in line with Taylor's, especially in recognizing "the felt absence in our times of one coherent and compelling worldview" and the associated "diverse sources of cultural value and memory" (Fishbane, pp. 9–10). He is especially interested in the effects of modernity and postmodernity on how we appropriate scriptures:

⁹ One marked difference is Taylor's copious reference to and summary of other writers; Fishbane largely refers to Jewish Scripture and its rabbinic interpreters, along with a few chosen moderns, such as Rosenzweig, Buber, Rilke, Beethoven, Cezanne, and Hopkins.

Moderns read the sacred texts and classics from different cultures (for pleasure, in translation, and without any moral prerequisites), and are influenced by them in varying degrees—so much so that our values are strange hybrids of all these canonical sources. Few persons are formed by one or another foundational text (such as scripture) to the exclusion of other influences, and these diverse materials may even challenge or complicate the foundational text and infuse our lives with a bevy of multicultural matrices of unequal value How then could one even think of turning to scripture (or some other textual canon) as a self-sufficient matrix to be correlated with our knowledge of the world? And even if we did consider this matter, the fact is that most moderns have lost a strong sense of texts and language, such as might bear the weight of interpretations seeking support for life’s tasks. Hardly do people feel the value of accommodating their new thinking to the challenge of the older scriptural (or other textual) sources, but rather easily and more readily assimilate the latter to their own standpoint or psychological matrix; and hardly do most moderns wish to center their lives around an ancient source, when there seem to be so many other texts of a secular or purely literary character that more evidently claim their moral and intellectual attention. Such conditions surely complicate the theological enterprise, and would seem to put it beyond the pale of past attempts to accommodate new thoughts to ancient texts. But without some grounding in scripture, of whatever sort, would a Jewish theology even be “Jewish”? (Fishbane, pp.10f.)

Fishbane’s way of grounding Jewish theology in Scripture takes this situation and other aspects of the secularity of our culture seriously: “Here below, in the vast phenomenal world, the project of theology must begin with a wholly natural attitude to the things and happenings of experience. There is no other way . . .” (Fishbane, p.13). It is a disenchanted world.

Fishbane’s models from the past are those thinkers, such as Philo and Maimonides, who have engaged as thoroughly as possible with the best in their contemporary philosophy and in other areas and have at the same time been profound and daring exegetes of Scripture.¹⁰ Yet he sees clearly that their ways of doing so can be learned from but not simply repeated, that modernity has changed the ways we understand the

¹⁰ He says: “the results are remarkable hybrids of truth-saying. Vital to this whole enterprise was the incorporation of all wisdom in the matrix of sacred scripture” (Fishbane, p. 6).

world and read Scripture. His own daring task is therefore to attempt something analogous to Maimonides for today by offering a contemporary Jewish hermeneutical theology.

His summary of the task echoes Taylor's concerns for human flourishing and for an immanence that is open to transcendence. He sees it as

. . . the spiritual and moral task of each person to become a fit vessel for modes of God's realization upon earth. Such a channelling of God's Aught would thus come through human hands and eyes, through mortal mouth and speech, and through earthly body and action as the self lives with other selves and beings and things in the vast physical universe. So conceived, all the impulses of human desire and conation emerge ultimately from the font of God's steadfast giving in a plenitude of worldly possibilities. This is God's bounty and faithfulness, such as we may imagine it; and it is the task of a theology through thought and tradition to cultivate this matter and guide the diverse pulsations of Divinity into the pathways of human culture—for the sake of righteousness and with reverent regard for the gifts we have received.

There is no guarantee that theology will perform this task well, and help persons to actualize God's Aught in ways that abet a responsible human flourishing. But this is an ideal. For theology, I may now also suggest, is a species of precisely that mode of "faithfulness" noted above: it is just that attunement of sensibility which seeks to promote a bond with God's infinite gifts of world-Being *and* to guide their earthly realization through human life at all times. Wherever this theological project becomes stultified or unresponsive to the moral or spiritual tasks of life, a vigorous reinterpretation of its texts and ideas is necessary. One must remain alert and act accordingly; for the revision of convention does not normally happen on its own, and the exegetical imagination is often needed to help religious cultures remain honest and keep their best priorities intact. Sometimes native resources do not prove sufficient to the demand; and then one might seek out other religions and cultural projects for instruction. In such instances, knowledge of the "other" may reveal gaps or inurements in one's own moral and spiritual life, or elicit agendas that have faded with time. It will then be the task of one's particular theology to evaluate these external factors and, to the degree possible, guide them into the formulations of one's own culture—appropriately transformed and even speaking the native language of one's "faith."

Every actual theology must thus appear in a specific cultural language. In this way, life is infused with an inherited intimacy of purpose and vision. But this said, it must never be forgotten that *theology* itself, as a

“discourse about God,” has the primary duty of serving God alone—not some particular religious formulation or tradition. (Fishbane, pp. 38f.)

That passage sets human flourishing in the context of the reality of God’s “steadfast giving,”¹¹ gives a leading role to an “exegetical imagination” that is vigilant, self-critical, open to new sources and developments, and above all is holy in its dedication to “serving God alone.” The dimensions of this are summed up in a “theological charge”:

To affirm God in one’s life, through mind and heart and deed, through teaching and interpretation everywhere; and to cultivate a mindfulness of this duty through signs and symbols, so that one will always be reminded of the sanctity of the body and its actions—in the home (as the domain of one’s family and future generations) and in the city (as the domain of society and the sphere of interpersonal values). A modern Jewish theology will do this in its own distinctive way, resonant with our contemporary sensibilities and mind-set. (Fishbane, p. 45)

The vital core of this theology is therefore its practice of exegesis. The central constructive part of Fishbane’s book is a double exposition (once relating to Scripture, once relating to liturgy, and all within the horizon of three interrelated types of Torah: Written, Oral, and the “All-in-All,” the *torah kelulah*) of four principal modes of textual interpretation. The four are *peshat* (plain or contextual meaning); *derash* (reformulations, drawing on the whole canon and its traditions of interpretation, responding to ongoing challenges in different situations and periods); *remez* (hints and allusions that may suggest moral, philosophical, or psychological analogies and allegories, allowing the theological interplay between Scripture or liturgy and other discourses); and *sod* (spiritual and mystical intuitions within the horizon of the whole mystery of God and the cosmos). Together these are conjoined in a complex practice of exegesis that attempts to realize *emunah*, which is a standing “steadfastly within the world as an expression of God’s

¹¹ Fishbane only rarely speaks of God’s power, but often of God’s “giving” or “effectivity,” or in other terms implying power.

ever-happening effectivity” and “before the incomprehensible fullness and diversity of God’s ‘Shall-be’” (Fishbane, pp. 168–69). Covenant theology “is an ever-present human attunement to God’s ‘Shall-be,’ and with it the obligation to respond. Doing and hearing are the tasks of gracious love” (Fishbane, p. 198).

I have summarised and quoted Fishbane’s text without his many references to the particular scriptures and their multifaceted interpretations that are inseparable from its validity as a Jewish theology. My concern as a Christian theologian is to make two main points. First, Fishbane shows, to my satisfaction, the feasibility of a theology that is both utterly scriptural and sensitive, critically and constructively, to the world as described by Taylor. Second, he does so in innovative Jewish terms. He wants to restore a multifaceted hermeneutic of Scripture “to a central position in the mental and spiritual universe of modern Jews” and to show how “scripture might again provide an authoritative matrix for contemporary religious thought and life—both at the level of content and that of structure” (Fishbane, pp. 156–57). Yet he has to innovate in order to remain faithful to his tradition and to God’s “Shall-be”:

The solutions offered here inevitably depart significantly from prior exemplars. This is as it must be. Each generation must produce the exegetical practices appropriate to its historical and intellectual situation, and befitting its own sense of integrity: *dor dor ve-dorshav*. I have suggested that the cognitive and cultural complexities of the modern situation support an approach more aligned to providing a series of multivalent attunements between scriptural hermeneutics and life, than one that seeks to correlate two fixed and coherent orbits of thought (such as scripture and natural philosophy). (Fishbane, p. 157)

Here too there is a parallel to Taylor, whose philosophy could hardly be described as a “fixed and coherent orbit of thought,” but whose diverse portrayals of aspects of our

secular age (which I myself would prefer to call a complexly religious and secular age) cry out for the sort of “multivalent statements” that Fishbane offers.

This leads naturally to an attempt to do something analogous to Fishbane’s Jewish theology within Christian theology. I will at least point in this direction by doing three things in the rest of this paper: asking about the contribution of Job and Ephesians to a contemporary understanding of God’s power and human flourishing; introducing the idea of attempts to promote human flourishing energized by God’s power as “experiments in providence”; and finally asking what all this might have to say about the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide.

God’s Power and Human Flourishing: Two More Biblical Texts

The two further biblical texts to be interpreted are from the book of Job and from the letter to the Ephesians.

Job and Fearing God for Nothing

The opening of the book of Job gives a picture of human flourishing:

Job 1:1–3

¹ There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

² There were born to him seven sons and three daughters.

³ He had seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants; so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the east.

The flourishing shown here is moral, religious, social, material, and political. The final chapter gives another picture of the same man flourishing.

Job 42

¹⁰ And the LORD restored the fortunes of Job when he had prayed for his friends; and the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before.

¹¹ Then there came to him all his brothers and sisters and all who had known him before, and they ate bread with him in his house; they showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil that the LORD had brought upon him; and each of them gave him a piece of money and a gold ring.

¹² The LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; and he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand donkeys.

¹³ He also had seven sons and three daughters.

¹⁴ He named the first Jemimah, the second Keziah, and the third Kerenhappuch.

¹⁵ In all the land there were no women so beautiful as Job's daughters; and their father gave them an inheritance along with their brothers.

¹⁶ After this Job lived one hundred and forty years, and saw his children, and his children's children, four generations.

¹⁷ And Job died, old and full of days.

Spot the difference! I read it the book of Job (following suggestions by Robert Alter) as an artful reworking of the traditional prose frame-story with which the book opens and closes, done in such a way as to indicate the significance of the wrestling with the meaning of Job's trauma that fills the many chapters of poetry in between.¹² We are shown in the passages above pre-trauma and post-trauma flourishing. The differences (relating to the prologue and epilogue in and beyond the passages I have quoted) include several movements: from an indirect to a direct relationship to God; from an anxious piety of repeated sacrifices (in case Job's children might have cursed God) to one centered on who God is (evidenced in that great pivotal moment: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" [Job 42:5]) and involving blessing, dialogue, recognition, and forgiveness; from the prologue's conspicuous consumption in the houses of Job's children to the epilogue's "community gathering around him to share bread in his own house . . . [where] the spirit is one of compassion, support and generous

¹² For my discussion of this and other points at greater length, see *Christian Wisdom*, chapters 3 and 4. On the ending see especially pp. 115–20.

gift-giving,”¹³ from a one-generational perspective to one of many generations; from superlatives (“the greatest” [Job 1:3]) to comparatives (“The LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning” [Job 42:12]), suggesting an openness to development and growth (such as happened to Job) rather than a static peak.

The ending often occasions the objection that it reverts to the theological universe of the friends of Job in which God blesses the righteous. But it can also be seen as an indicator of the wisdom that Job has learned through his suffering and through the engagement with his friends and with God, and as a picture of ordinary life after trauma. The full theological implications of this would require, in Fishbane’s terms, all four exegetical modes. I want to draw from the ending just one lesson, which goes to the heart of Taylor’s distinction between Christian and exclusive humanist conceptions of flourishing and which is also crucial to Fishbane’s conception of Jewish flourishing. I discuss it more fully in *Christian Wisdom*—indeed in the writing of that book the lessons of the book of Job on this point were formative for the central theme (which amounts to one way into the topic of “God’s power and human flourishing”) of learning to live in wisdom and love before the “God of blessing who loves in wisdom.”

The point is raised as a question by Satan in the prologue: “Does Job fear God for nothing?” (Job 1:9). Does he fear God for God’s sake? Or does he do so because of his wealth, family, religious assurance, and other benefits? If this is taken as the hermeneutical key to the book of Job, then there are considerable implications for our topic. In the face of Job’s archetypal deprivation of human flourishing, the friends ascribe it directly to the almighty power of God, who destroys the wicked and blesses the righteous, with the implication that Job has sinned (cf. Eliphaz in Job 4). Overall, their

¹³ Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 117.

theology is one that repeats traditional maxims about the direct correlation between human goodness and divine blessing. The lesson of the book is more than that these maxims do not ring true experientially: after all, the wicked often seem to flourish and the innocent often suffer greatly. It is that this possibility of the wicked flourishing and the innocent suffering is the condition for the possibility of something that goes to the heart of the relationship between God and human beings: relating to God for God's sake. The friends' theology might be seen as, in Taylor's terms, the sort of position that easily leads to atheism: when experience goes against it, the emphasis on human behavior as the condition for human welfare can shift into autonomous mode. Job's theology is far more God-centered, as is God's own theology out of the whirlwind. Job refuses to give up on God, he cries out, asks the big questions, longs for satisfaction. However unsatisfactory his complaints (while they are outrageous to his friends, they are only comparatively displeasing to God, who rebukes him but also says to Eliphaz: "My wrath is kindled against you and your two friends, for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has" [Job 42:7]), they are not so much concerned with returning to his first state of flourishing (though of course he misses it) as with his relationship with God. He is crying out to get God, not his possessions, back. Through all the suffering, wrestling, and searching, Job is being searched and tested by God, and in the process he embodies the answer to Satan's question: "Yes," he fears God for nothing.

Who is this God? One of Taylor's repeated points is that in the journey of the West from 1500 AD to the present, the way to the atheism of exclusive humanism has frequently been opened up by inadequate, impoverished, or corrupted theology. I see Job's "God for God's sake" as an antidote to many of the distortions Taylor describes,

but only if, as Fishbane might insist, it is kept in play in our lives by being continually reread, by readers alert to its many senses and to the issues and urgencies of our own times. So we need continually to press further into the theological meanings of this inexhaustible book. On who God is in its light, one of my own conclusions is as follows:

Who is the God he meets? The previous chapter [in *Christian Wisdom*] above described the God of the Prologue, whirlwind speeches and Epilogue as one who is to be blessed for his own sake, just as creation, Job and humanity are to be celebrated for their own sake. But there is one further crucial thing to be said about God, springing from the conversation he has with the Satan in the Prologue. There he is seen staking his own name on Job, allowing Job to vindicate his judgement on Job's integrity or not [T]his is presented as an open question for God as well as for the Satan and Job. *In the openness of life in history, God's name is at stake. Why?* The question about Job is whether he fears God for nothing, gratuitously, and I have just argued that that happens in his debate with his friends. But what does this mean for who God is? Putting his name at stake in history could be seen as arbitrary or an interesting gamble, but the reason that rings true with the preciousness to him of his relationship with Job is that ***God does this for the sake of the "for nothing" relationship with Job.*** This is beyond all manipulation, *quid pro quo*, or threat of retribution. It is not only the secret of the possibility of blessing, love, freedom and integrity between God and any human being; it points to the secret of the wisdom of this God. *God's own "for nothing" is the wisdom of one who risks a relationship without guarantees, and who gives human existence the terrifying dignity of a life and death drama in which wisdom and foolishness really matter.*¹⁴

Ephesians and Fullness

The letter to the Ephesians can be read in relation to our topic as a rich and complex working out of God's power and human flourishing in their interrelation. Less time will be spent on this than on Job, since the main writing I draw on relates Ephesians directly to our topic.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 133.

¹⁵ David F. Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Part II of the book has six chapters under the heading of "Flourishings," the first of which, chapter 5 on the book of Ephesians, is "Communicating God's abundance: a singing self." The other chapters deal with flourishing in relation to celebrating the eucharist, facing Jesus Christ, the lives of Thérèse of Lisieux

“Fullness” is one of Taylor’s key terms for flourishing:

We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we often have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g., of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfilment, where we feel ourselves there There may just be moments when the deep divisions, distractions, worries, sadnesses that seem to drag us down are somehow dissolved, or brought into alignment, so that we feel united, moving forward, suddenly capable and full of energy.¹⁶

That describes a fullness that could be either religious or exclusively humanist. Ephesians gives a specifically Christian portrayal of this/such fullness. It touches on several of Taylor’s marks: besides fullness there are richness, depth, what is admirable or praiseworthy, power, inspiration, peace, overcoming divisions, integrity, generosity, self-forgetfulness, joy, energy.

Yet very little of the specific character of Ephesians is conveyed by such a list. The boundless riches are those of the Gospel of Christ. The depth is related to the love of Christ and being “filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:19). The praise is of the glory of God and his grace in Jesus Christ; the power is linked to fullness in

the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the

and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and feasting. All of these and more would need to be drawn in for a fuller treatment of the topic of this consultation.

¹⁶ Taylor, pp. 5–6.

head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:19-23)

The inspiration is linked to fullness too, in being “filled with the Spirit, as you sing” (5:18f.). The integrity of “speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) is linked into the gifts and virtues of a community engaged with growing together in Christ and being knit together in love. The generosity of giving to the needy (Ephesians 4:28) is part of an ethic linked to the injunction to “live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2). The peace and overcoming of divisions is rooted in the death of Jesus that breaks down the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles and creates “one new humanity” (Ephesians 2:15) in Christ. And power and energy are constantly emphasised as part of living in the Spirit of Christ in love. And that is just using the terms that are mentioned in Taylor’s short passage! The deeper one goes into a specific fullness, such as this or the one rendered by Fishbane, the more one realizes that it draws one into a multidimensional “ecology” that leaves the general philosophical terms, for all their usefulness in certain contexts, exposed as relatively empty and impoverished. They cry out for the long-term, sustainable, renewable living of Torah or the Gospel.

In Ephesians even the fullness of God seems to be transcended. After asking that the Ephesians be filled with all the fullness of God, the prayer continues:

Ephesians 3:

²⁰ Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,

²¹ to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

It seems the abundance goes far beyond even the fullness of God that has just been prayerfully invoked. A spiralling of glory redefines fullness in line with the dynamic of praise that completes completeness, perfects perfection, and overflows fullness— generation after generation. It is the Ephesians version of the *torah kelulah*, a further dimension to the *oikonomia* for the fullness of time with which the letter opens:

Ephesians 1

⁸ With all wisdom and insight

⁹ he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ,

¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Experiments in Providence

If that *oikonomia* is the reality within which we live, the divine invitation is to seek more of that “wisdom and insight” (Ephesians 1:8) and to grow “to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13) in order to be more fully part of the gathering up of all things. It is a conception of flourishing that embraces all times and all reality, yet somehow avoids being totalitarian or triumphalist.¹⁷ I find the same gentle fullness in Fishbane’s *torah kelulah*. But if one is not to treat this as a blueprint for an imperialist faith that claims an overview of reality and is unable to respect the deepest differences, how might one conceive one’s participation in it?

Timothy Jenkins, my social anthropologist colleague in Cambridge, has described his chaplaincy in a university as follows:

Activity in this case is first of all enquiry, and initiative is going to sites and events organised by other people. Much of a chaplain’s work is in waiting for opportunities and in the invisible task of organising a trajectory, of discovering how, in practice, he gets to places where one

¹⁷ Or does it? For my argument that it does, see Ford, *Self and Salvation*, pp. 130ff.

would not expect to find him, of researching the questions he wants to ask, the people to encounter and the moments to meet. In this light, activities organized by the chaplain can be a distraction from the real business in hand, a failure of nerve and a retreat from meeting with reality. The discipline is in waiting and paying attention, and “success” is not masterminding well-attended events, but in finding oneself put to work in hitherto inaccessible places. In short, this approach may be termed “an experiment in providence.”¹⁸

The attitude is in harmony with Fishbane’s repeated emphasis on attention, alertness, and mindfulness, with the unexpected meeting on the road to Emmaus, and with the maxim of Ephesians:

Ephesians 5

¹⁴ Therefore it says, ‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.’

¹⁵ Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise,

¹⁶ making the most of the time, because the days are evil.

¹⁷ So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

“God’s power” and “human flourishing” are rather upbeat ideas by themselves; here they are soberly translated into the wise wakefulness of attentive living in evil times. Each life, each Christian community, and every other community too, whether conscious of it or not, can be seen as involved in an experiment in providence. It is, as Job learned, God’s providence in God’s creation, and it can often be extremely bewildering. The deepest secret is nevertheless, with Luke, John, Fishbane, Job, and the author of Ephesians, by God’s grace to persevere in faith for God’s sake and to seek to live wisely before God. At Yale one is reminded of the deep yet modest theologies of providence associated with H. Richard Niebuhr and Hans Frei, the latter so well grasped and even enhanced by Mike Higton’s recent study.¹⁹

¹⁸ Timothy Jenkins, *An Experiment in Providence. How faith engages with the world* (London: SPCK, 2006), p. 8.

¹⁹ Mike Higton, *Christ, Providence and History. Hans W. Frei’s Public Theology* (London and New York: T&T Clark International, 2004). I suspect that a thorough dialogue between Taylor and Frei would

What about Rwanda?

Two concluding words about Rwanda. One is a Taylorian reflection on what my daughter discovered in the two organizations for survivors that she studied. One was a secular organization, using Western methods of medicine and psychotherapy. The other was Christian, and while it also used the Western methods of medicine and psychotherapy, these were set in the context of many other Christian ministries, at the heart of which was regular, lively worship. My daughter's opinion was that the latter succeeded better in meeting the needs of those who had been through trauma—their need for dignity, meaning, and a substitute for lost family as well as for psychological and physical healing. It seemed like an ironic comment on the “story of subtraction” that Taylor sees as a rationale for much exclusive humanism: take away religion and you are left with ordinary, mature, and rational flourishing of a purely human kind, freed from the childish comforts of religion. The Rwandan genocide was one of the most terrible indictments of Christianity in the twentieth century; yet somehow what had been so terribly corrupted is now part of the healing.

Finally, there is in Taylor a recurrent theme of “the festive” and the ways in which Western modernity, both in its religious (Catholic and Protestant) and secular versions, has in this sphere lost out on something in comparison with earlier periods and other cultures. Learning from my daughter of survivors' taking part in celebratory worship and interpreting their experience through the Bible, and reading Fishbane on the Sabbath and the Jewish festivals, I am reminded of my friend Micheal O'Siadhail's book of poetry on the Shoah. The final section, “Prisoners of Hope,” is an attempt, after having faced the

show considerable differences, especially in the way each understands the secular and its relationship to Christianity.

killing of Jews in the East and in the concentration camps, to ask how life, and even poetry, are ever possible again after such trauma. Responding to Adorno's denial of poetry after Auschwitz, he writes in "Never":

That any poem after Auschwitz is obscene?
Covenants of silence so broken between us
Can we still promise or trust what we mean?

Even in the dark of earth, seeds will swell.
All the interweavings and fullness of being,
Nothing less may insure against our hell.

A black sun only shines out of a vacuum.
Cold narrowings and idols of blood and soil.
And all the more now, we can't sing dumb!

A conversation so rich it knows it never arrives
Or forecloses; in a buzz and cross-ruff of polity
The restless subversive ragtime of what thrives.

Endless dialogues. The criss-cross of flourishings.
Again and over again our complex yes.
A raucous glory and the whole jazz of things.

The sudden riffs of surprise beyond our ken;
Out of control, a music's brimming let-go.
We feast to keep our promise of never again.²⁰

²⁰ Micheal O'Siadhail, *The Gossamer Wall. Poems in Witness to the Holocaust* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2002), p. 120. For my interpretation of the poem in the context of a discussion of Job and the Shoah, see Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 141.